

A Review of Opinions Concerning The Evangelical Test in American Associations

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A STATEMENT

To satisfactorily answer the hundreds of letters which have come to me concerning the opinions of association men on the question of continuing or changing the evangelical test, as a basis of active membership in the Young Men's Christian Association, necessitates the issuance of this general review of the situation. Perhaps in some measure, it may be a source of helpfulness to those who are interested in a study of the problem.

It is evident that neither the ultra-conservatives nor the ultra-liberals can eventually control the policy of the organization. There is a much greater body of conservatively progressive men, who think accurately, see clearly, and will act dispassionately in the final adjustment of its fundamental standards.

To a careful consideration of the statements offered by men of diverse opinions, I therefore respectfully call your attention, with the sincere hope that your reading may be without prejudice.

G K Shurtleff

Cleveland, November 1907

The Situation

A "questionnaire" addressed to more than 600 general secretaries, inviting their opinions as to whether there,

1. Should be a revision of the present standard of active membership?

2. An alternate basis adopted?

3. Or whether the whole matter should be dropped?

resulted in 538 replies: 67 of these would prefer to consider a revision of the paragraph in the present test, which defines the phrase, "Evangelical Church."

327 expressed themselves as preferring an alternate statement; 144 would deprecate any attempt to discuss either a revision or alternate statement at the Washington convention.

There seems to be less sectionalism in the complexion of the answers than was anticipated. All sections of the country contain representatives of the varying shades of opinions. It was made very evident, however, that whatever action is considered, there must be adherence to the fundamental doctrine of the "Deity of Jesus Christ" in any contemplated change. This was expressed in so overwhelming a manner that no doubt is possible concerning the position which would be taken by the employed force of the association.

The college men entered the discussion with great heart and keen intelligence. Their demand is insistent for some kind of remedial legislation. The following excerpts from letters, describe the feeling in scores of our educational institutions.

"We are marking time here; not doing much, waiting and looking for a brighter day, when progress will be possible under a revised test of membership."

"The prejudice against us in this college is strong, growing and becoming vindictive. The faculty is against us because of the narrow sectarian spirit which they claim our condition of membership forces."

“Our Committee will await the action of the Washington convention with much concern, for the question is vital to us. To go on under the present condition will be impossible.”

“I suppose we shall live any way, because we have a building, but the strong fellows, especially the ‘frats’ are not interested. There have got to be several changes before we shall be a wholesome influence in the College.”

To an association man concerned with the future of the organization, the natural query is, How far can the convention go in disregarding the general feeling of these men without inviting a schismatic movement?

Among the 225 Railroad Associations, 151 have responded to to an inquiry covering the following :

1. Is your Board appointed or elected ?
2. If appointed, by whom ?
3. If elected, do you allow others than evangelical church members to vote ?
4. Have you men on your Board who are not members of an evangelical church?
5. If so, do you think them desirable officers ?

The replies showed that 26 per cent were “off the test” in one way and another. Some had non-church communicants on their Boards of Directors, others allowed *all* members to vote, while 15 now observing the Portland basis, but not counted in the above percentage, wished that some change in the rule could be made “for the good of the service.”

It is understood that the International office, in behalf of the Committee on Credentials, is already notifying associations on bases differing from the Portland test that their delegates will not be admitted to voting membership in the Washington convention. By the same token, it would seem that associations professing allegiance to the test, but notoriously disregarding its plain provisions, should also be disbarred from participation. The course of the committee in this respect, will be an interesting study.

As to the local associations, no direct effort has been made to obtain data. There are, however, 102 organizations known to be disregarding in part or as a whole, the conditions imposed by the evangelical test.

The Insistent Question

In view of the foregoing incomplete analysis of the situation, the question of policy is immediate. What shall we do with the situation? Allow matters to drift until our equivocal position becomes a scandal? Disfranchise non-concurring associations at the Washington meeting? Attempt remedial legislation for the relief of those who are not now with us or enact a "curative" resolution which will hold matters in *statu quo* until such time as the convention shall be forced to consider the problem?

II

The Conservative Position

Those who favor "letting the whole matter drop" and doing nothing at the Washington convention are curiously enough divided into two parties.

1. Those whose opinions would find expression in the preamble to a resolution by the Missouri State Convention held in 1906.

"Believing that the unexampled prosperity enjoyed by the Association in recent years, is to be attributed under the blessing of God to the confidence of His people, begotten and inspired by our loyalty to His Divine Word, and to the fundamental doctrines of Evangelical Christianity, we recommend that we affirm our allegiance to the Evangelical test of active membership, and to the definition of Evangelical churches as adopted by the International Convention of the Young Men's Christian Associations held at Portland, Maine in 1869."

2. Those whose convictions are summed up in a letter which reads as follows:—

“The normal way in which advancing communities get rid of their blue laws and creedal restrictions, is just to let them fall into ‘innocuous desuetude.’ A sycamore lets its old bark quietly dry up, and drop off. I think if we have not got beyond the Paris basis, the time has not come to make any move. To insist that Jesus is ‘our God’ is not a New Testament idea. Paul would not have assented to it for a moment. He asserts that man is as much above woman as God is above Christ.”

It means that the growing spirit of liberalism, in their opinion, will soon develop to the point, where greater latitude could be gained in some future convention rather than in the one about to be held, because the situation will reach such an acute crisis that action will be imperative to prevent organic division.

These two factions represent the spirit of conservatism as it stands today in opposition to a progressive standard. One is the conservatism of the theologian; the other the conservatism of the politician.

III

The Revisionists' Point of View

From a few, too few, to be called a party, yet men whose opinions must be considered, comes the demand for the adoption of a definition of “Evangelical Church” to take the place of the present statement in the Portland resolution as follows:

“We hold those churches to be evangelical that are entitled to representation in the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America under the action taken by the Inter-Church Conference, held in New York City, November 1905.”

Its proponents present the following reasons for its substitution;

1. “It would again and more emphatically proclaim our loyalty to the evangelical churches.”

2. "It would not in any way change the present basis."

3. "It is so innocuous that its passage ought to be easy in a convention such as will be held in Washington."

4. "It would satisfy those who want some change without really giving them anything."

The above considerations were submitted to twelve wise men for judgment. Their replies group themselves under the following statements:

1. "Who knows what the Church Federation will stand for five years from now on the fundamentals of evangelical christianity; they may have admitted Unitarians by that time and then we shall be bound by their action."

2. "Because it is meaningless—simply a politician's way of temporarily smoothing over and side tracking a difficult 'proposition.'"

3. "It would seem to shoulder our responsibility off on to another body of Christians. We ought to be competent enough to determine our own policies."

IV

Concerning a Commission

From fifteen secretaries, without particular relation to their own convictions, but an evident fear that some hasty action may be taken, comes the suggestion that a Commission be appointed, made up of representatives from evangelical schools, churches, colleges and theological seminaries, to spend the intervening three years before the next convention, in making a careful study of the situation and offering a new test, which shall be considered for adoption.

The need of men with trained minds, accustomed to careful expression, and versed in all the intricacies of theological opinion and formula, is deemed by the supporters of this proposition as essential to the intelligent solution of the question.

To make haste now, they contend, may result in years of regret and the loss of irrecoverable ground.

This was submitted for consideration to six men of judgment and in sympathy with conservative action. As a matter of record, not one of the six approved of the suggestion. One of the number replied by a letter which seemed to epitomize the expressions of the several correspondents. It is as follows:

“At first, the suggestion impressed me as fair, particularly as I dreaded the contentions which seemed unavoidable if the matter ever reached the debatable stage in the Convention. Personally, I am in doubt as to the wisest course and would gladly shift the burden of deciding the problem to say twenty-one, such men as the Convention would undoubtedly select. But after a second consideration of the matter, a conversation with my pastor and President. of.....College, I have about concluded that it would be the most dangerous policy to pursue, because, do you not see, that we would have three years of turmoil, beside which the times preceding the Buffalo Convention, would not be a marker. Wire pulling, log rolling and other unseemly methods would characterize the attitude of all strong partisans. I doubt, too, whether a satisfactory committee could be selected. If it were pre-eminently liberal, then I would be dissatisfied. If it were filled with my school of believers, then you would be ready to fight and if we tried between us to select them half and half, then the Committee itself would range for three years and get nowhere. So, probably the best course, to save the Association much embarrassment will be to settle it in open Convention if we have to. At least, we can do it with less loss of time and temper. My experienced friends, in whose judgment I have confidence, warn me against the dangers of a commission. Better they say, and I agree, do nothing than run such unknown risks.”

V

An Advanced Position

A very popular suggestion has been offered by an eastern general secretary. It finds many hearty sympathizers among the New England associations, both local and college. Several colleges in the central west would also approve it. It is as follows:

“The Young Men’s Christian Associations seek to unite those young men, members of the Christian Church, who, taking the Holy Scriptures as their guide, desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ in life and service and to associate their efforts in the extension of His Kingdom among young men.”

This reads almost like the Paris basis, but its differences are significant. In brief, it omits reference to the doctrine of Christ's deity. However, its friends claim for it absolute fidelity to the teachings of the New Testament and catholicity enough to include all "who profess and call themselves Christians." They say that it will stand the "acid test" of theological criticism. There has been some doubt expressed by its warmest advocates, as to whether the delegates at the forthcoming convention, will stand for a test which puts "principle before dogma and the truth above tradition." Its approval would probably satisfy a larger number of persons not now working with us, than any other that has been suggested. The strongly orthodox men, to whom it has been referred for criticism, do not object to it for anything which it says, but rather for important doctrinal statements which it seems to avoid. Its course before the convention will be worth observing, for about it centers the crux of the problem.

VI

The Paris Basis

During the several months through which the correspondence has been in progress, in many letters and in casual conversations, the Paris basis has been alluded to as the most desirable form, in which an alternate statement could be phrased, both on account of its scriptural soundness and its felicitous expression. It seemed natural, therefore, that a gathering of college general secretaries meeting in Niagara Falls last June, should have proposed it for the consideration of the Brotherhood with two additions, i e, "membership in some Christian Church" or "a declaration of intention to unite with a Christian Church;" (this declaration would apply to College Associations only.)

The principle upon which such a basis would rest would be two fold as follows :

1. The applicant must be a member of some Christian Church.*
2. The applicant must sign the following statement of desire and purpose :—

“The Young Men’s Christian Associations seek to unite those young men, who, regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour, according to the Holy Scriptures, desire to be His disciples, in their doctrine and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom among young men.”

The men who stand for this statement maintain its adherence to scriptural truth, its comprehensiveness, its conservativeness, its real breadth and simplicity. They have suggested the following reasons:

1. The membership would be purified. As it now stands, many unfit men gain active membership because of their formal membership in some evangelical church. Their life and conduct is a scandal in many communities. The signing of this basis does not reflect on the judgment of the church. The church demands a special and particular pledge of its members when they would join such societies as the Epworth League, the Society of Christian Endeavor, the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, the Baptist Young People’s Union and other similar organizations. The method, therefore, is in conformity with ecclesiastical precedent.

2. It would continue our relation to the Church as at present. To define the term “Christian Church” would be as difficult as to define the phrase “Evangelical Church.” The word “Evangelical” does not mean the same thing that it did fifty years ago. It does not mean the same thing in Hong Kong or Calcutta or Shanghai that it does in London, New York and St. Louis today.

3. It would put the American Associations on practically the same basis as Associations in other countries. Today we stand aloof and eccentric. Such an adoption would tend to organic unity in the world’s movement for saving men.

*In College Associations, the declarative clause would be added, because many young men, converted during the college year, would be excluded from active membership, on account of their inability to unite with their family church until their return home at the end of their college year.

4. It would admit members of the Roman, Universalist and Unitarian Churches now excluded, provided they were with us in "life and doctrine" and would so signify by signing the basis. We have Unitarians, Universalists, etc. with us now in the active membership, but they come in as members of Congregational, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian or Episcopal Churches. The feeling among many is that the present "deal is not square."

5. It is a much simpler statement, less theological, less metaphysical, less polemic, than the present one and easier to defend and explain.

6. Its adoption would save years of discord and uncertainty.

In opposition to this position, Mr Thomas Gillespie of Pittsburg has published the following criticism:

1. It would change our relation to the Evangelical Churches.

2. The terms used are too indefinite and would lead to endless confusion in interpretation and practice.

3. It gives greater weight to the statement of an applicant for membership in our Associations than to his Confession of Christ made in his own church.

4. Those who are orthodox in their belief, but are members of churches now excluded from active membership in our Associations, can more readily change their church relations than we can change our Evangelical Test.

5. The proposal is decidedly a retrograde movement, taking us back to the Association's position of forty years ago.



PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDURE

A clause of rule No 4 in "Rules of the International Convention of Young Men's Christian Associations" reads as follows:

The President shall appoint the following standing Committees:

"A Committee on Resolutions, to which all resolutions, memorials and propositions shall be handed, on or before the second day of the session of the Convention, each paper to contain the name of the proposer and the name of the Association he represents; these resolutions to be at once referred to the Committee without reading."